Advice to Policy Makers Who Would Tackle Syria
The Problem with Problem Solving

BY ROBERT RICIGLIANO AND KAREN GRATTAN

While there is not much consensus on the specific way forward in Syria, there is one thing most do agree on; Syria is complex. It is complex in the familiar use of that term: complicated, intricate, and hard to understand. But it is also complex in the technical sense: an interrelated system of diverse components that interact with each other and their environment in ways that are dynamic and difficult to predict.

This distinction and understanding the distinction are critical to the success of policy makers trying to grapple with Syria. As a whole, Syria along with the broadening regional conflict is a wicked problem for policy makers;[2] presenting challenges similar to those that have frustrated efforts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), among others. These complexity related challenges include: the regularity of unintended negative consequences; situations where one party's solution is another party's problem; "fixes" that work in the short term but fail in the medium term; tactics that are successful in one place but are difficult to replicate; "zombie problems" that do not stay fixed; problems that resist a definitive definition; and the reality that new urgent issues constantly outstrip the amount of resources available to address them. Most importantly, and deeply characteristic of the wicked problem, is the requirement for continuous and adaptive learning, as the "problem" is more deeply understood with every effort to develop or enact its solution.

Success in Syria means that in addition to the content of any individual policy, plan, or decision, policy makers need to change the process by which they engage with Syria and produce a series of decisions over time. The purpose of this article is not to advocate specific policy options. Rather, this piece will highlight four key practices that policy makers can use to maximize their

Robert Ricigliano is now director of UW-Milwaukee's Institute of World Affairs and coordinator for the university's peace studies program.

Karen Grattan is a doctoral candidate at the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University.

ability to generate effective policy for Syria (as well as other complex and dynamic environments). Explained in more detail below, these four practices include:

1. See in "3-D";
2. Engage Patterns, Not Problems;
3. Align Fast and Slow Variables;
4. Fail Smart, Adapt Fast, and Leverage Success!

See in "3-D"

The sheer volume of important information about Syria that an informed policy maker could usefully know is overwhelming, such as political actors, dynamics among and within rebel groups, clan rivalries, tensions among religious groups, environmental drivers, regional influences, historical wounds, etc. No one, not even those who have spent their whole lives in Syria, have a complete picture of why Syria is the way it is.

And more information is not necessarily better, as a truly comprehensive view of Syria would soon become incomprehensible to our limited human brains. The traditional approach to grappling with this level of complexity is to focus our vision by breaking the problem down into manageable chunks that will readily lend themselves to analysis and most clearly point to a policy solution. For example, when viewed in isolation, purging members of the Baath party from the post-Saddam, transitional government in Iraq seemed like an obvious fix to a broken system. In retrospect, the consequences of this policy were disastrous as many correlate the rise in the insurgency with the rise in disgruntled and newly out-of-work Baathists.

Moreover, this reductionist approach is exactly what not to do in a complex system. Complexity is characterized by multiple, often counter-intuitive, and constantly evolving interrelationships between parts of the system. A reductionist approach – pulling one factor out of its murky and hard to understand environment – may make it easier to fix that particular piece (e.g., the corrupting influence of political "dead enders" in the post invasion Iraq). However, it often makes it more difficult to deal with the underlying problem (e.g., stabilizing a post-Saddam Iraq).

This leaves policy makers in a bind where (a) seeing the full complexity of Syria is overwhelming (comprehensiveness undermining comprehensibility) and, (b) reducing Syria to seemingly manageable parts is often ineffective or counter productive (achieving comprehensibility by sacrificing comprehensiveness).

The way out of this bind is to change how we see complex systems like Syria, similar to the way seeing a movie in 3-D produces a richer picture than watching in just two dimensions. The way to see a comprehensible, but sufficiently comprehensive picture of Syria is to use a different version of 3-D vision – one that honors the reality that complex social systems are made up of three distinct but interrelated dimensions:

- Structural dimension: all social systems have institutions and infrastructures that are meant to meet the basic human needs of those resident in the system. These structures relate to governance, security, economy, human health (food security, public health); environment/natural resources, rule of law/human rights, and civic health (media, education, civil society);
- Attitudinal dimension: widely held beliefs and norms as well as intergroup relations that affect the level of cooperation

between groups and within social structures. Attitudinal factors include identity groups, social capital, core grievances, and inter-group dynamics;

- Transactional dimension: the processes and skills used by key people to deal with conflict, solve problems, and manage key structural and attitudinal issues. This is a sub-set of behavioral factors, but it focuses on the critical role that key people play (e.g., influencers, people who control resources, opinion leaders, etc.). These key people can exist at the local, national or supra-national level.

KEY ISSUE *Lack of consensus among rebel and opposition groups*	
Upstream Causes	Downstream Causes
Structural: ■ Weak organizational structures within rebel groups; ■ Historically divided civil society; ■ Limited funding to rebels; ■ Pervasive insecurity among rebel groups.	Structural: ■ No structure for future government; ■ Large number of displaced and refugees; ■ Opposition leadership must perpetually fundraise; cannot develop strategic plan.
Attitudinal: ■ Deep suspicions between secular and religious groups; ■ History of tension and distrust between ethnic and religious groups in Syria; ■ Resentment toward wealthy Syrians who benefit from the current government.	Attitudinal: ■ War weariness, popular feeling of hopelessness; ■ Growing rift between population and rebel/opposition groups; ■ Lack of interest in engaging with large swaths of pro-government Syrians in a negotiated solution.
Transactional: ■ No clear leader accepted by opposition and rebel groups; ■ Meddling by outside states/actors; ■ Syrian government systematically eliminates political rivals.	Transactional: ■ Weak negotiating position vis-à-vis Assad government; ■ Infighting among rebel groups and opposition politicians; ■ Ineffective opposition leadership.

Instead of narrowing the field of vision and breaking a problem down in order to find a "fixable" piece, complex environments require that policy makers see any specific phenomenon as having an upstream of structural, attitudinal, and transactional causes and a downstream of structural, attitudinal, and transactional impacts.

Consider the fractures among Syrian opposition groups: Policy makers should develop several "upstream/downstream" structural, attitudinal, and transactional (SAT) analyses for the key issues they confront in an environment like Syria. One exercise that can start this process is to ask, "What are the key challenges to peace and security in Syria?" or "What are the key enablers and key inhibitors of peace in Syria?" For each of these key challenges or enablers/inhibitors of peace, it is helpful to do an upstream/downstream analysis such as the one above. Similarly, if one has a potential solution or key action they think will improve Syria, one should do a similar analysis to test their thinking.

For example, if one were considering whether to disarm all rebel fighters after a cessation of hostilities through a gun buy back program, what are all the upstream reasons (structural, attitudinal, and transactional) people have guns/want to hold onto their guns; and what are all the potential downstream impacts (both those we like and the ones we may not like).

The purpose of this analysis is twofold. First, this analysis helps policy makers resist the temptation to grasp at a simple answer to such a complex issue, like assuming the solution to the lack of consensus among rebel and opposition groups is to simply mediate an agreement. An agreement alone might address one of the transactional or structural factors identified above (as incomplete as this sample analysis is), but would do nothing to address deeper attitudinal factors or other structural and transactional factors. Second, and more importantly, taking a holistic perspective on a key issue, such as the lack of consensus among the armed and the political groups, sets the stage for the next key step in managing complexity; identifying how these structural, attitudinal, and transactional factors are interrelated and form the building blocks of persistent patterns of behavior that hold the key to fostering change in Syria.

Engage Patterns, Not Problems

A vexing characteristic of complex systems is that systems are not broken, even if they produce outcomes that we dislike (e.g., violence, poverty, oppression). In fact, systems contain ever-broadening webs of connected dynamics, many of which will work to maintain the status quo. Because of this, attempting to fix or change individual pieces of the system usually has little impact on the underlying system itself. So, changing even a key piece of the context – such as replacing Saddam Hussein in Iraq or even Hosni Mubarak in Egypt – does not change the underlying system that produced those leaders. Note how the crowds that filled Cairo's Tahrir Square in 2011 to oust President Hosni Mubarak, looked eerily similar to the crowds assembled in Tahrir Square in 2013 to oust President Mohamed Morsi.

The key is to identify and understand the underlying social patterns that produce the problems that fix our attention (e.g., violence, dictators, crises). Professor George Richardson defines a systems approach this way: "A systems view stands back just far enough to deliberately blur discrete events into patterns of behavior." It is these patterns that animate and

propel a system and it is affecting these patterns that allows policy makers to have an impact on how systems behave over time. For example, if policy makers want to see a future Syria that is more stable, has greater levels of participatory and accountable governance, and shows greater respect for human rights, then what patterns of behavior affect the presence of these factors, and how might they need to change to produce more desired outcomes?

Understanding key social patterns starts with doing the upstream/downstream SAT analysis as described above. After doing this analysis on several key issues, the analyst will step back and ask two questions: (1) are there key structural, attitudinal or transactional factors that occur often or are given great importance; and (2) what are the interrelationships among these key SAT factors? Based on the answers to these questions, the next step is to start stringing these interrelated factors into a causal loop, such as the "Splits Among Syrian Rebel Groups" loop on the following page.

What pattern of behavior produces the current lack of consensus among rebel and opposition groups in Syria? How are the upstream and downstream SAT factors identified above related to each other (and to upstream and downstream factors associated with other key challenges or enablers/inhibitors of peace, such as regional meddling, arms flows, etc.)?

The discipline of systems mapping provides a useful way of conceiving of and visualizing these patterns. For example, in relation to the lack of consensus between Syrian rebel and political opposition groups, a simple

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"11th of February - A memorable day! Mubarak has resigned! The revolution has succeeded and for the first time in tens of years, Egypt sees hope again!" Fixes that work in the short term but fail in the medium term

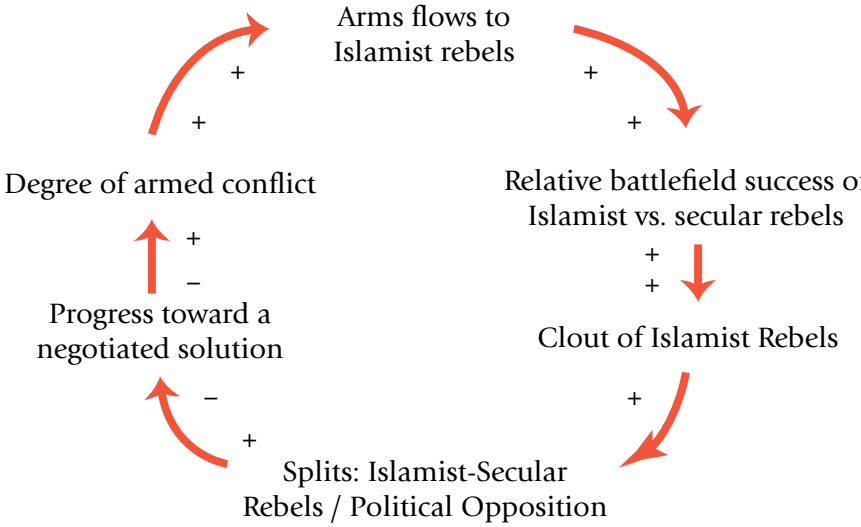
pattern might look like the following feedback loop:

In this loop (reading clockwise from the top), as "arms flows to Islamist rebels" increases (as denoted by the "+" sign), then these groups have more relative success on the battlefield versus less well-armed, secular rebel groups. In turn, this increases the clout of these groups and contributes to greater political splits between Islamist and secular groups.[3] As these splits increase, it decreases (as denoted by the "-"sign) the progress toward a negotiated agreement that would stop the fighting. The lack of an agreement then increases the degree of armed conflict which fuels even more arms flows to the Islamist rebel groups. This is a vicious (or reinforcing) cycle because each time around the loop, we see more arms flows, greater splits, and more armed conflict. Likewise, loops can represent dynamics that are virtuous (meaning the situation is getting better over time), as well as stabilizing or stagnating dynamics, which preserve the status quo for better or worse.

Feedback loops are not themselves reality. However, they are a way of improving how we conceive of a dynamic context such as Syria from seeing it as a series of discrete events to understanding Syria as a web of patterns or feedback loops. Further, we can identify the interconnections between feedback loops and build a systems map of Syria. A full systems map is a valuable tool for policy analysis, and can be built up over time. For example, beginning with the single feedback loop above and working out from factors identified, an analyst might ask, what other forces affect the level of splits between Islamist and secular opposition groups? What dynamics impact the level of tension between these groups? What other impacts does the lack of progress toward a political settlement have?

An analysis of key social patterns increases the chances of successful policy making in several ways. First, success in managing complex systems depends on the ability to engage, not fix, these patterns. The general prescription for dealing with patterns or feedback loops is to

Splits Among Syrian Rebel Groups



strengthen stabilizing loops (ones that keep things from getting worse) or virtuous cycles (ones that make things better) and to weaken or disrupt stagnating loops (ones that keep a bad situation from getting better) or vicious cycles (ones that make things worse and worse over time). Second, and more importantly, affecting patterns can be the key to solving the problem of strained or insufficient resources because they introduce the potential to find high leverage strategies. Because complex systems are made up of multiple, interlocking dynamics patterns, change to any one of these patterns will have ripple effects on other patterns in the system. Leverage occurs when an initial positive impact on part of a system is amplified by the interconnectedness and inherent dynamism among the feedback loops which make up the system.

There are indicators of potential leverage points that policy makers can use. Some patterns will seem "frozen in time" while others are changing and evolving organically. These areas, known as "factors in flux," are potential leverage points because policy makers can work to affect how the system is going to respond to this naturally occurring change rather than try to create change from scratch (a much more resource-intensive undertaking). There are also "bright spots," or islands of positive news amidst a sea of bad news. Underlying bright spots are positive dynamics that could be strengthened. Lastly, there are also dynamics that have both positive and negative impacts on the wider system. The potential for leverage here comes from the possibility of lessening the negative impact of the dynamic and increasing the likelihood that the dynamic will have positive ripple effects throughout the system.

For example, if the "Splits Among Syrian Rebels" loop, a vicious cycle, could be weakened or interrupted, then the negative impact of this loop on other loops would also be weakened (first ripple). As a result, a weak stabilizing loop may be strengthened and have a positive impact on the system (second ripple). In turn, this might cause another vicious cycle to switch over to becoming a virtuous cycle (third ripple). As a result of this positive chain reaction, perhaps the initial vicious cycle, the "Rebel Splits" loop might be further weakened. One of the most effective ways to engage the system is to build the linkages between dynamics, especially between those that include factors that change much more slowly and those that can be affected in the short term.

Align Fast and Slow Variables

The fundamental impact of engaging patterns instead of trying to fix discrete problems is that it conforms to a basic truism about systems change: that systems change best, when systems change themselves. Working with and through systems is more effective than trying to impose change, but it also means that real change can take longer. For example, deposing Saddam in Iraq gave an initial perception of "Mission Accomplished", but real change in Iraq (e.g., a stable, democratic, and prosperous society) has proven much more elusive.

In reality, different parts of a system change at different rates. For example, actions directed at attitudinal factors, such as producing a "democratic culture" or improving relations between Hutus and Tutsis, change slowly (e.g., are slow variables). Actions aimed at addressing structural factors, such as building a market economy, improving basic infrastructure, or establishing a system for public health, may take years, but usually change faster than

attitudinal factors. Transactional approaches, such as improving relationships between key leaders, negotiating an agreement, or conducting a dialogue, can happen in relatively short time frames that are measured in weeks or months (hence these are fast variables).

A common pitfall for policy makers is to address fast variables, perhaps because of the political pressure to show short-term results. In the case of Syria, this often means increased pledges of funding that solve the rebels' short-term budgetary issues but fail to help build leadership and vision within the opposition. Unfortunately, actions aimed at affecting fast variables often undermine long-term success by making it more difficult to change slow variables.

The common practice of holding quick elections as part of a transition from an armed conflict or dictatorship is a good example of this tendency. Holding elections is a relatively fast variable (they can be organized in a period of months). In a stable democracy, elections are the transactional manifestation of both legitimate institutions and the attitudes and values of the citizens. The longer-term goal in a place like DRC, Egypt, or Afghanistan, is to build a stable and well-functioning state. This requires several slow variables, such as the building of democratic culture, legitimate and effective state structures, and higher degrees of social capital in a currently divided society. The problem is that fast elections often have impacts that work against having a positive impact on these slower variables. As we have seen in several cases, election violence, allegations of voter fraud or result rigging, and an increase in hate speech tend to exacerbate

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"Nasarwasalam, Iraq (Jan. 30,2005) - Iraqi citizens come out in masses to vote in the first ever "Free Elections" in Iraq. Security was provided by the Iraqi Security Force and the U.S. Marines. The election was boycotted by Sunnis"

ethnic tensions, de-legitimize state structures, and build popular disillusionment with democracy.

For example in Syria, in a post-violence situation, a major immediate problem is likely to be the lack of a legitimate government. Fast elections might be seen as a near-term fix to this problem. However, Syria will undoubtedly be similar to neighboring Lebanon or Iraq, whose political contours are largely defined by the shape of its different ethnicities and religious sects.[4] This is an unstable system whose viability relies on preventing deep-seated community grievances from spilling into outright confessional violence. Fast elections on the heels of a traumatic and divisive violent conflict that increased levels of grievance and distrust between these different communities may be the impetus to pre-election violence and/or post-election allegations of fraud (and hence an additional threat of violence).

Further, pushing for a fast election in such an environment may codify identity politics in Syria, preventing progress on long-term issues like national reconciliation. Moreover, holding an election that results in political parties built on ethno-sectarian lines may cement demographic ratios between communities. In a system that rewards power based on the relative size of one's community, this means that relative population size often forms the basis for political power sharing. In Iraq, this relationship is subtler. But in Lebanon, demographics directly determine political power. This erodes basic state functions: Iraq has not held a census in key cities, such as Kirkuk, in over half a century. Lebanon has not held a countrywide census in nearly 100 years. These are two examples of how pushing a fast variable such as elections can work against long-term strategic goals such as national reconciliation, and even inhibit basic state functions.

It is not that we should not address the fast variables; it is that they must be understood in the context of the broader system and its dynamics. Without such an understanding, efforts are bound to overlook important factors that should be addressed simultaneously to prevent or mitigate unintended negative consequences. This tendency for policy makers to affect fast variables in ways that work against a desired change in slow variables is known as the classic "fix that fails."

Policies that generate better outcomes and more lasting impacts are those that consider the interconnections between fast variables and slow variables. Building and shaping the connectivity between fast and slow dynamics early can both protect against the fix that fails as well as bolster or build momentum for impacts on slower variables within the system. To do this, policy makers can begin cataloging important factors as fast or slow variables and then consider the potential interconnections between them, such as elections and identity politics. The emerging practice of multistep, staged processes for both increasing participation and inclusivity in political transitions while simultaneously undertaking governance reform is an example of how transactional efforts can be linked to efforts addressing the attitudinal and structural dimensions.

In the SAT approach, attitudinal factors are typically the most stable over time and therefore the slowest variables when it comes to change. Further, attitudes tend to be buffered within stabilizing dynamics that reinforce them. Structural factors are less slow to change than attitudes, but changes can still take a long time and be impacted by many other dynamics within the system. Transactional factors are the

most readily changed and can be leveraged in powerful ways to affect broader and more lasting change. This is especially true when policies build the linkages between transactional interventions (such as a mediation process), longer-term processes of change in social structure and social attitudes. An alternative to quick national elections is to start with locally organized governance activity designed to build democratic systems from the ground up and to build a democratic culture through multiple, iterative experiences with participatory governance.

Developing explicit hypotheses linking efforts directed at fast variables to change in slower variables forces policy makers to be more explicit about how short-term actions might best lead to long-term goals. Instead, policy makers all too often have a vague strategy that if "we do something good in the short term (like hold an election), it will necessarily lead to good in the long term." In turn, the alternative of using iterative strategies that build over time provides more opportunities for course corrections, which is a critical part of the last policy making practice: fail smart and adapt fast!

Fail Smart, Adapt Fast, and Leverage Success!

No policymaker ever sets out to fail in his or her analysis or policy recommendations. Still, no matter how nuanced the analysis or well considered the approach, many policies fail. If failure is not unexpected, then certainly the practice should be to mitigate it, or even better, to fail smart. By failing smart we can minimize the costs of failure and maximize the likelihood that we will learn key lessons from the experience.

When dealing with complex contexts like Syria's, success should not just – or even mainly be – measured by the immediate ability to meet predetermined objectives. Indeed, many short-term successes are deceptively malignant, as initial success can mask subtle signs of failure. Likewise, from the ashes of apparent short-term failure can raise catalytic change for the better. Critical to policy success in these contexts is learning about the patterns and dynamics of the system in which analysts must be engaging and adapting in a timely manner. This requires policymakers use a version of "shorter product cycles" to organize their policy apparatus so they can plan, act, learn, and adapt in weeks or months, and not years. Planning and acting will be enhanced by the first three practices described above.

Real learning *about* the system and how best to *engage* with it can only be done by policy makers who directly interact with the system over time. Engaging the system of Syria in a way that enables learning and adaptation requires a good bit of humility and a lot of thoughtful preparation. Mapping the system is only part of this process. As philosopher Alfred Korzybski so famously noted, "the map is not the territory." As such, policy practitioners must be ever prepared to update or change their understanding of the system in which they are operating. In turn, this requires a learning infrastructure. What are the core assumptions about important social dynamics, possible high leverage activities, and the relationships between key fast variables and slow variables? What indicators will you use to test these assumptions and how will you gather, analyze, and feed this learning back into your policy making process?

One way to learn effectively about a complex system like Syria is to frame any policy

approach as a hypothesis and fully explicate what dynamics are expected to be impacted and in what ways. Similar to a logic model or theory of change, a systems hypothesis links policy to key factors and dynamics. It will depict upstream requirements or assumptions, as well as downstream impacts including second and third order effects. Having a hypothesis for system engagement also means that the markers or indicators for systems change are identified and rigorously monitored. Continuous monitoring and sensing of the environment occurs so that hypotheses can be confirmed or refuted. Maintaining a learning stance with regard to the system also increases the likelihood that emergent patterns and the opportunities and/or risks they present will be identified more quickly.

One example applied to Syria would be developing a hypothesis for engaging the system of local administrative councils, or governing structures set up to administer local towns and city neighborhoods in the country's opposition-held areas. Recent analyses of these councils since November 2012 shows the widest discrepancies between "successful" governing structures – those that are able to design and implement basic service provision and assistance delivery programs – and "failures," which often include areas in which councils had existed, but whose collapse precipitated the entry of Islamic extremist groups.

One example of a systemic learning plan for this environment would be to first work with "successful" local councils. A complex environment like Syria presents many unknown challenges. However by expanding the capability of already-successful councils, policy makers can analyze not only *what* works in Syria, but *how* to work in the country. What do these successful councils have in common? What pitfalls must we avoid? What do local communities desire most from these councils? Framing the system and developing a hypothesis for system engagement is essential, but continuous monitoring and sensing is equally important. In addition to evaluating the approach on its face by asking – does assistance make the council more or less "successful" – one must also understand the *causes* for that success and how it can be applied elsewhere.

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This kind of learning infrastructure can maximize the potential to learn from experience, but failing smart also requires that policy makers minimize the potential costs of failure. Contrasted to policies that take a frontal approach (much bigger fixes), scaled efforts minimize risk (and cost of failure) and maximize learning. One clear way to minimize the cost of failure is to implement policy in strategically placed parts of the system. Often thought of as "piloting" an approach, the idea of implementing a policy on a limited basis before rolling it out across the nation (e.g., working first with successful local councils before trying to improve struggling ones elsewhere) allows policy makers to test their key hypotheses (about critical dynamics and causal relationship among factors) and to test their monitoring framework.

Engaging with the system on a smaller scale not only benefits overall learning, but scaled engagements can be leveraged by building up connections between fast and slow

dynamics. For example, supporting successful governing councils at a local level might allow more time for stakeholder engagement and capacity building. It may also provide faster feedback loops between community concerns and concrete responses by local councils, which in turn can build more trust in new social institutions. Programs implemented in this way can also build civil society and increase dialogue such that intergroup trust and attitudes might improve.

Successful policies (or more likely successful adaptations) need to be leveraged across the system – as opposed to being mechanically replicated. A smaller scale, more precisely designed and monitored project can provide a more nuanced explanation of why a particular policy worked, so that policy makers can sort out which determinants of success are highly context dependent (and hence difficult to replicate) and which are more generalizable (thus easier to replicate in other areas).

In general, the ability to fail smart and maximize learning requires a shift in how failure is understood, and this may require a change in organizational culture. In complex contexts, some significant degree of failure should be seen as expected. Instead of being an outcome to be avoided, negative or unexpected results should be treated as a learning opportunity that can lead to more effective policy. An organizational culture that operates this way understands that to fail smart also means that there must be a "safe fail." Such organizations assure learning by being transparent and humble in the face of systemic complexity. Organizations structured for learning support the emergence of teams including participation that is self-selecting and cross-disciplinary. They reward learning, even when it is predicated by failure.

Conclusion – Keep Your Eyes On The Prize

These four practices are each ways to help policy makers see and work with systems as a means of improving our effectiveness. These practices are also predicated on defining the ultimate success of policy in holistic terms – in terms of how it positively impacts the evolution of a social system. The goal of policy in Syria is to produce a more peaceful Syria that improves the quality of life for all Syrians. Success is not just defined in traditional, sectorally-bound ways, e.g., holding an election, reducing battlefield casualties, increasing GDP by a few percentage points, or reducing extreme abuses of human rights. The prize is a better Syria.

Success at the systemic level means that we need to think about policy as being about *engagement* not intervention. Measuring the success of an intervention implies that at some point things will be fixed, at least enough so that we can go home. As the famed "Mission Accomplished" photo after the invasion of Iraq demonstrated, often these pronouncements of a successful intervention prove wrong. The hard reality is that we cannot impose change on a system – even with the world's largest military and biggest economy.

Measuring success in an engagement means that we are looking for signs that we are on the right track and should continue down the path (or have gotten off track and need to find our way back). An engagement implies that there is no "finished by" date because systems are constantly evolving. We may be more or less engaged, but the reality is, there is no artificial end.

This means that the problems in Syria cannot be "solved" in the short-term. Neither

the removal of Assad, nor international control of his chemical arsenal will win the "prize" of transition to stability and peace. Each policy initiative is important, but the transition process will defy any single salutary initiative.

How, then, will we know if we are being successful? First, in addition to the immediate on the ground impact of any policy, we will be more successful to the extent that we learn effectively. If we arm the opposition, what did they do with those arms and why? We need to look at both the intended/predicted outcomes and those we did not predict or intend. What impact did these arms transfers have on the regime and why? What does this tell us about key patterns of behavior in Syria and how we can engage with them more effectively? Second, what impact are we having on fast variables (e.g. negotiations, material support, casualties, etc.) and are they building toward changes in slower variables (improved relations among rebel groups, rebuilding infrastructure, building toward a culture of participatory and accountable governance, fostering respect for human rights, improving strained ethnic relations, etc.).

Lastly, we should constantly strive to evaluate the process by which we are engaging in Syria and using these four complexity practices: that we are seeing any problem or potential solution in "3-D;" that we are engaging important social patterns, not trying to artificially fix problems; that we distinguish between fast and slow variables and are using fast variables to build toward longer-term goals; and lastly that we know how to fail smart, adapt fast, and leverage our successes.

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NOTES

[1] Many of the ideas in this article are based on Ricigliano, R. (2012), Making Peace Last: a toolbox for sustainable peacebuilding. Paradigm Publishers: Boulder, CO.

[2] Referring to the term coined in the 1973 article by Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber, *Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning*, Policy Sciences (4): 155-169 that describes a certain class of problems and the nature of their solution. This class of problems has 10 basic characteristics and are known as wicked problems.

[3] Note: even if agreement is reached among the rebels, the presence of an agreement does not mean that these underlying dynamics will have ceased to exist. In fact, in many cases, it is the existence of these dynamics that drive the ultimate breakdown in many peace agreements.

[4] A similar phenomenon occurred in Syria on its first election after the French Mandate in 1947. Then, a minority government took power in an election that largely broke on ethnic and sectarian lines.